

FURNATION

Issue #



Art and
Stories by:

**Artdecade, Kadath,
Growly Genet, Tak,
Snowy, David Lillie
and Alex Vance!**

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Mature Content. Adults Only

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<http://www.furaffinity.net/user/artdecade>

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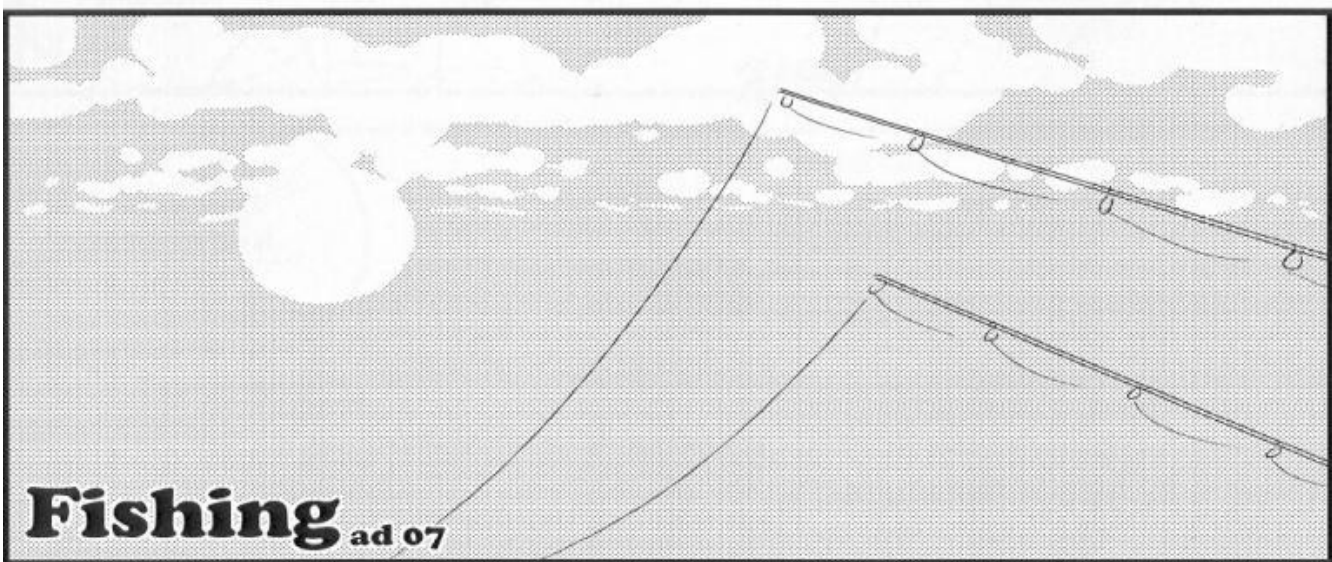
Front Cover Graphics by Grrrwolf and David Lillie

The cover art for this issue is a collaboration between Grrrwolf and David Lillie. Grrrwolf was our featured gallery artist in FurNation #8 and David has a comic based on his Dreamkeepers graphic novel appearing in this issue. If you would like to know more about these fine artists, please visit their websites:

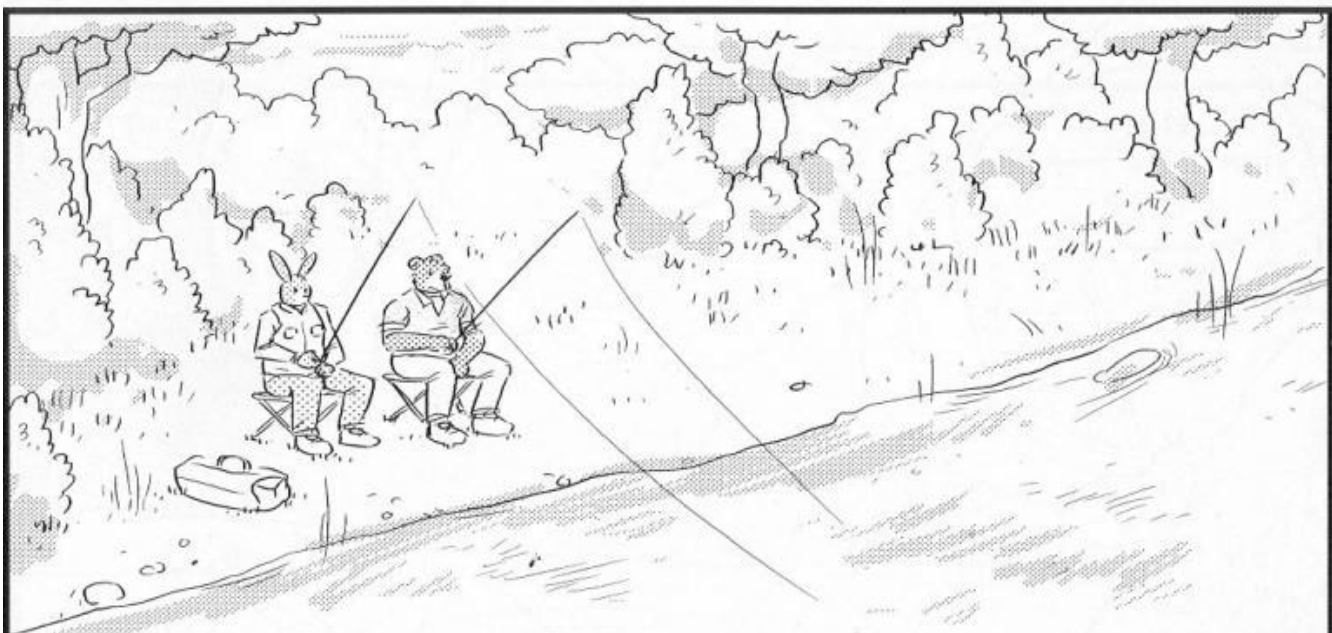
Grrrwolf: <http://www.FurNation.com/Grrrwolf>
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Grrrwolfartist/>

David Lillie: www.Dreamkeeperscomic.com

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Fishing ad 07



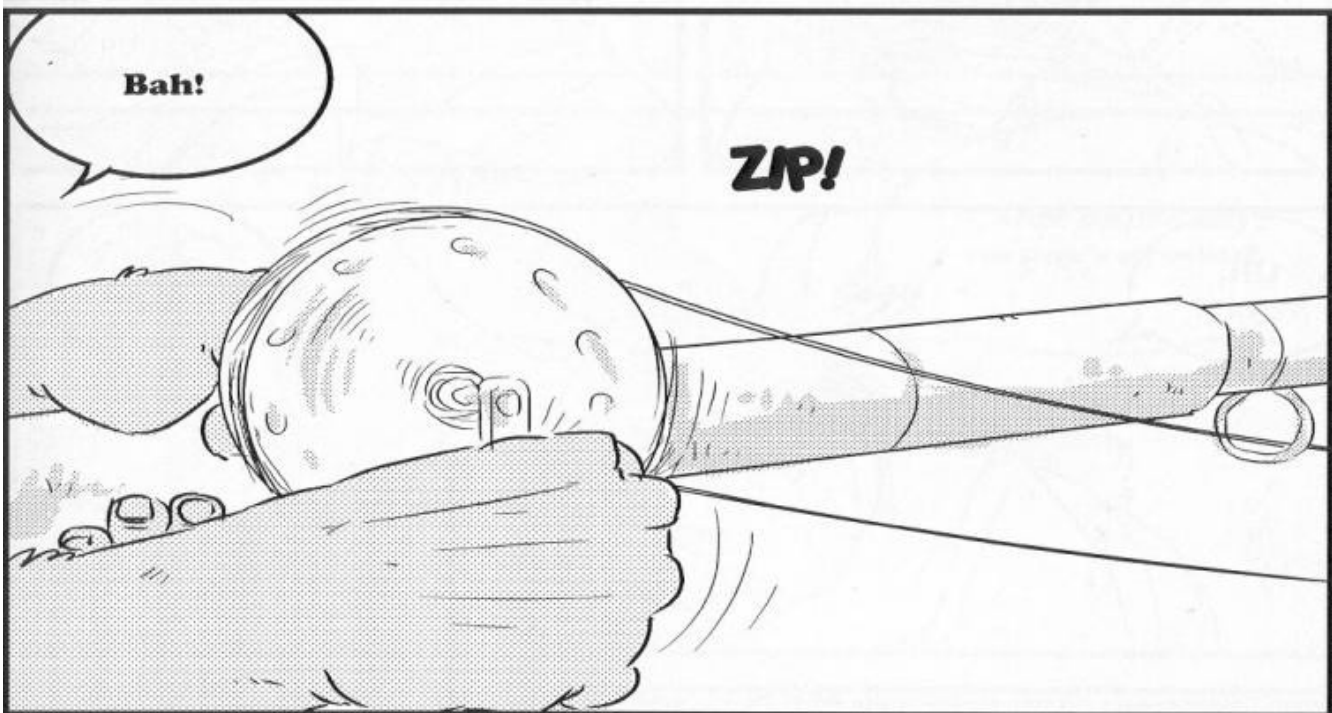


Well ...

**Fish sure as
hell ain't biting
today.**



**Had to be
hot as hell,
too.**





**You know, the
missus' are all the
way back at the
ranch ...**



**We
could ...**



**Uh,
what?**

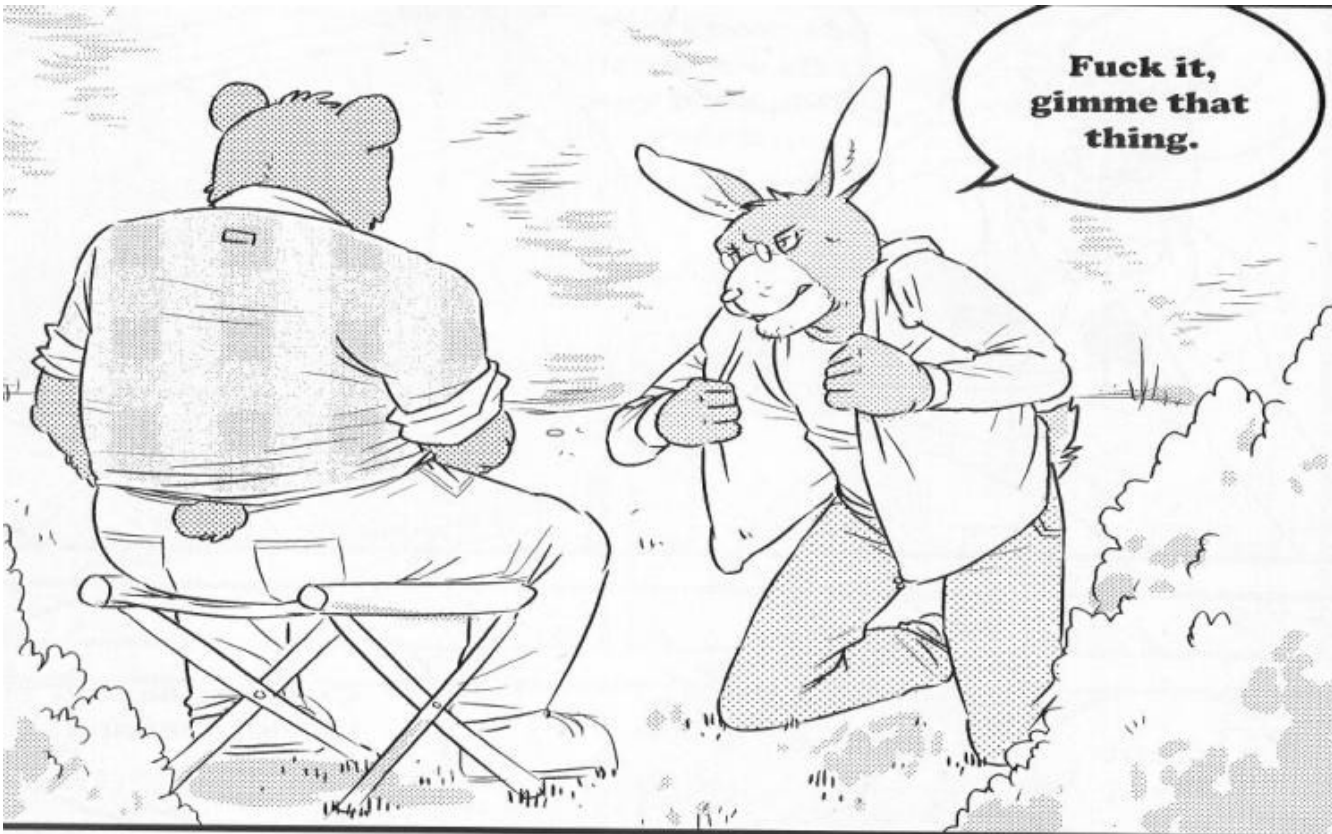
**Out
here?**



**In the
middle of
the wood--**

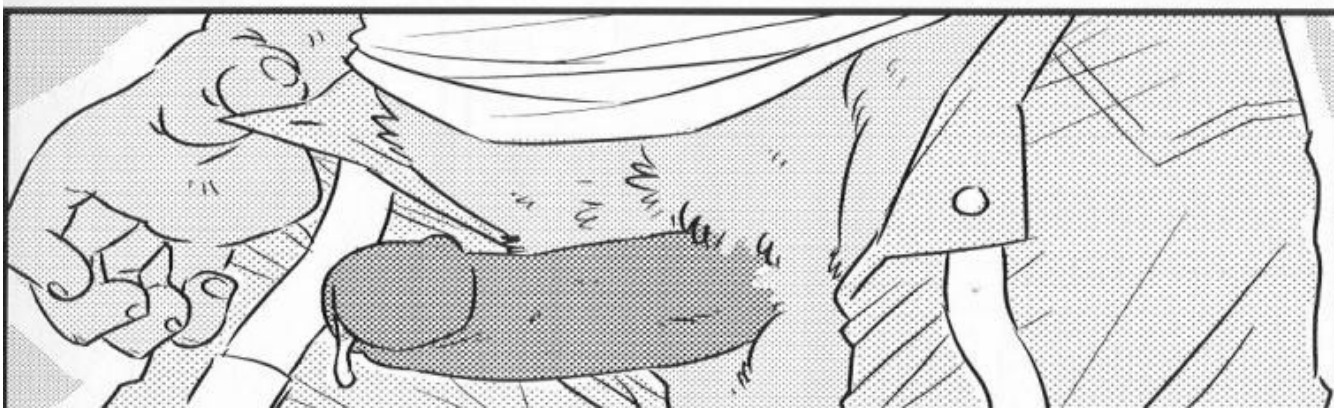
Ahem.













'Nuff of that,
you know what
I need ...





**Don't go
easy on me,
Benny.**



**Heh, course I
won't, I still owe
you from last
time ...**

**Couldn't
walk right
for a week.**







SNACK!!



RRGH!



**Oh, fuck
yeh ...**

Ngh ...



**Mff! I said to
let me adjust
you- Gmf!-
bastard!**

**SNACK/
SLAP!**

Shutup.

You love
it, you fat
bitch.

SNACK!

SLAP!

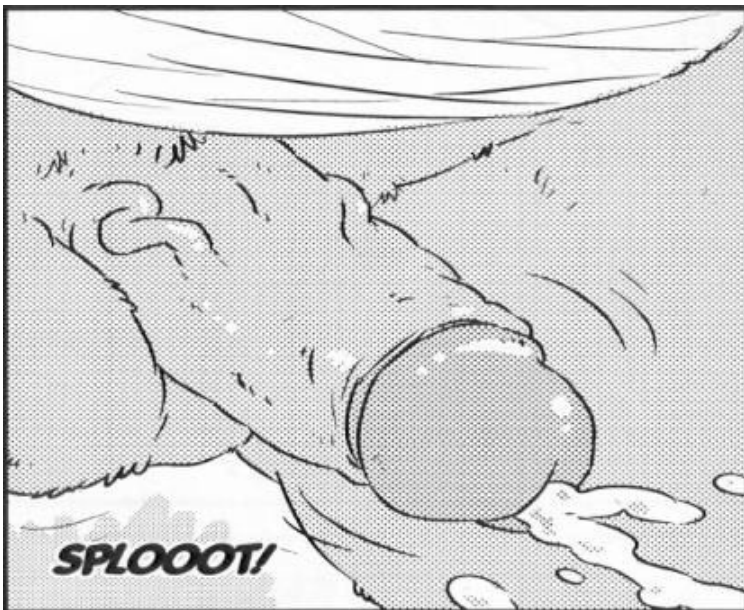
SNACK!
SNACK!

SNACK!

Uuuuhh,
God, I'm gonna
squirt ...

SLAP!
SNACK!

PANT
PANT



DreamKeepers^{© 2007}

THE DREAMWORLD IS A MYSTERIOUS REALITY THAT PARALLELS OUR OWN. HUMANS CANNOT ENTER THIS REALITY - WE CAN ONLY CATCH FLEETING GLIMPSES OF IT THROUGH OUR DREAMING, UNCONSCIOUS MINDS.

DARK THINGS LURK IN THIS FANTASY WORLD, HOWEVER - AND WE ARE VULNERABLE WHILE WE SLEEP. THEY THIRST TO CROSS FROM THEIR WORLD INTO OUR UNCONSCIOUS AND DEFENSELESS MINDS - USING OUR DREAMS AS THE BRIDGE. THE ONLY THING BLOCKING THEIR PATH IS THE EXISTENCE OF THE DREAMKEEPERS.

EVERY LAST PERSON HAS A DREAMKEEPER, AN EMBODIMENT IN THE DREAMWORLD. SO LONG AS YOUR DREAMKEEPER LIVES, THE NIGHTMARE HORDES CANNOT ENTER YOUR MIND THROUGH YOUR DREAMS. EVERYONE'S DREAMKEEPER IS COMPLETELY UNIQUE - YOUR PERSONALITY AND SUBCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE YOUR DREAMKEEPER'S APPEARANCE AND ABILITIES.

JUST AS WE ARE IGNORANT OF THEM, THEY HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE OF US AND OUR WORLD. YET DESPITE OUR SEPARATE REALITIES, THEIR LIVES ARE TIED TO OURS. IF A COUPLE FALLS IN LOVE HERE, THEIR DREAMKEEPERS WILL SHARE THAT LOVE. ONE THING WE DO NOT SHARE, HOWEVER, IS THEIR PERIL.

THE NIGHTMARISH EVILS OF THE DREAMWORLD KNOW THAT THE DREAMKEEPER'S LIFE PROTECTS US. THEIR DARK MINDS SCHEME AND STRIVE TO DESTROY THE DREAMKEEPERS, TO SPILL THEIR BLOOD, AND TO UTTERLY END THEIR EXISTENCE.

THIS IS WHY THE DREAMKEEPERS ARE GIFTED WITH SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES - EACH DREAMKEEPER HAS A UNIQUE POWER WITH WHICH TO DEFEND THEMSELVES AND THEIR FRIENDS.

IN THIS STORY, WE GET A GLIMPSE FROM THE ADVENTURES OF FIVE YOUNG DREAMKEEPERS UPON WHOM FATE HAS HINGED - MACE, WHIP, LILITH, NAMAH, AND BAST. IN THE ANCIENT RUINS OF A DARK SACRIFICIAL TEMPLE, THEIR LIVES ARE THREATENED BY THE NIGHTMARISH TENDRIL - AN UNSATIABLE FOE WITH AN UNCANNY REGENERATIVE ABILITY...



www.dreamkeeperscomic.com

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"PANT"... DON'T
KNOW WHY THEY
HAD TO BUILD THIS
PIT SO DAMN
DEEP...

HURRY! IT'S
ALMOST HE-

HIT IT HARD-
DON'T LET HIM
OVER THE
EDGE!











POOM POOM

POOM POOM

PTHUDD

CRACK

PATHETIC, I...

I- WHAT?

FEELING A BIT WEAK, ARE WE?

YOU LITTLE BITCH!

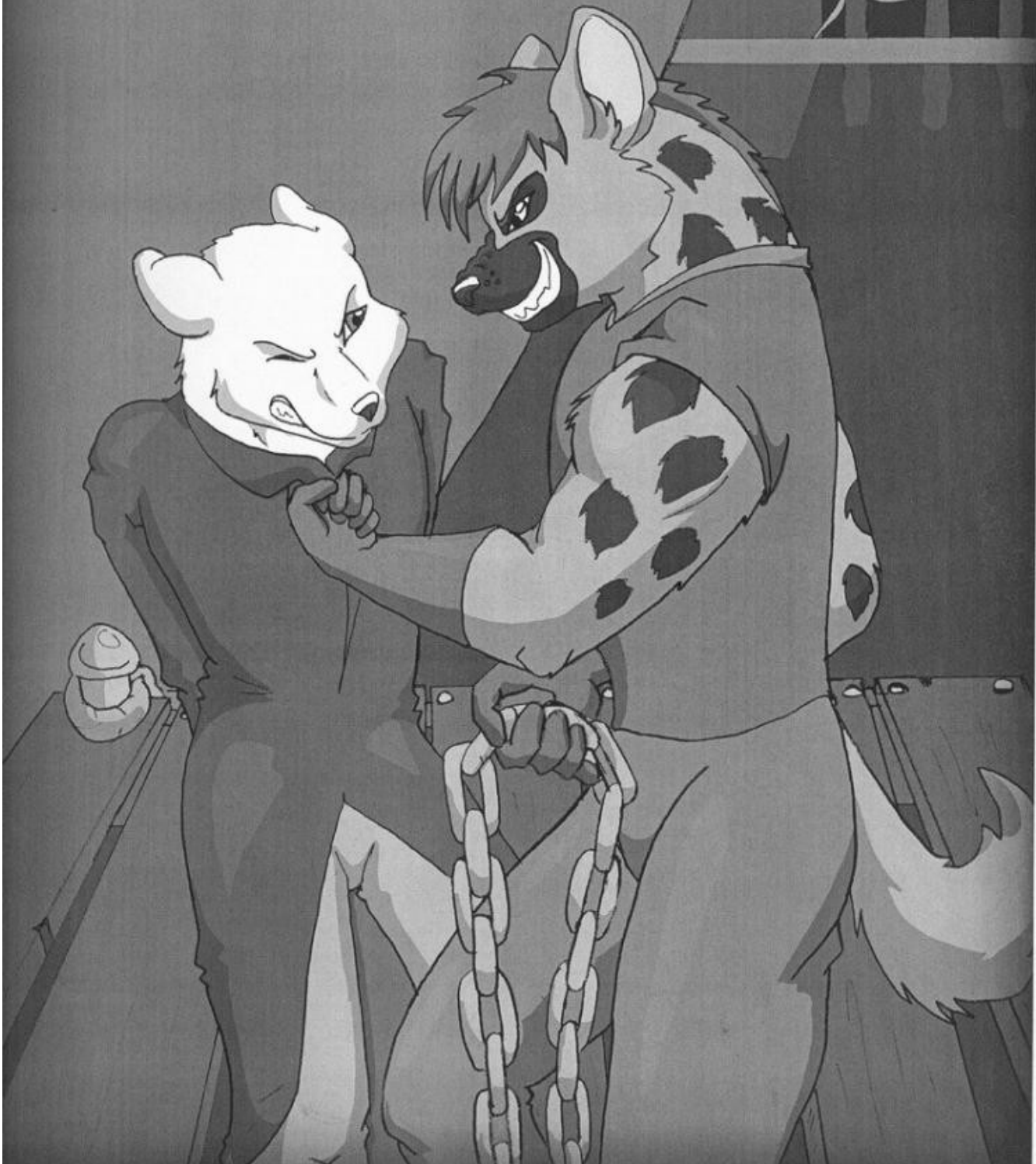






T.A.K.

A comic by:
Growly Genet, Tak & Snowy



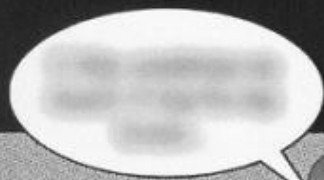
TRENT ARAMIS KNIGHTLY IN:

The Case of the Dancing Doe Part 3

My name is Trent Aramis Knightly. I find people.

I was looking for a girl.

I found trouble.



I was hired to find Michelle Dearhart. She fell in with some low life mobsters.

I'm starting to get the feeling that what everyone really cares about is the book.

I just don't know what book.



You get to meet some colourful characters in my line of work.

You've been sticking your snout in where it doesn't belong.

We can't have that now, can we?

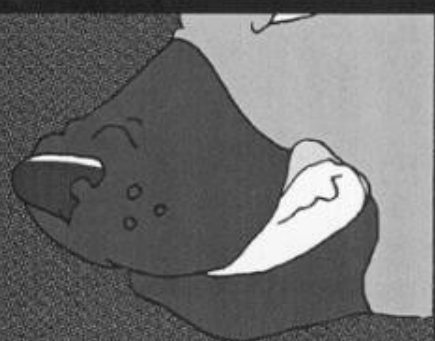
Well if I'd known it would be a problem, I'd have bought them dinner first.



Cute. Better get your laughs in now Mr Knightly, because your time's up.



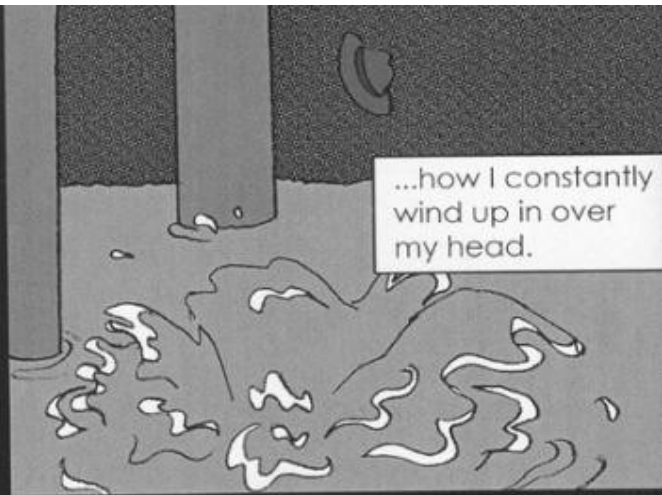
Have fun with the fishes, pup.



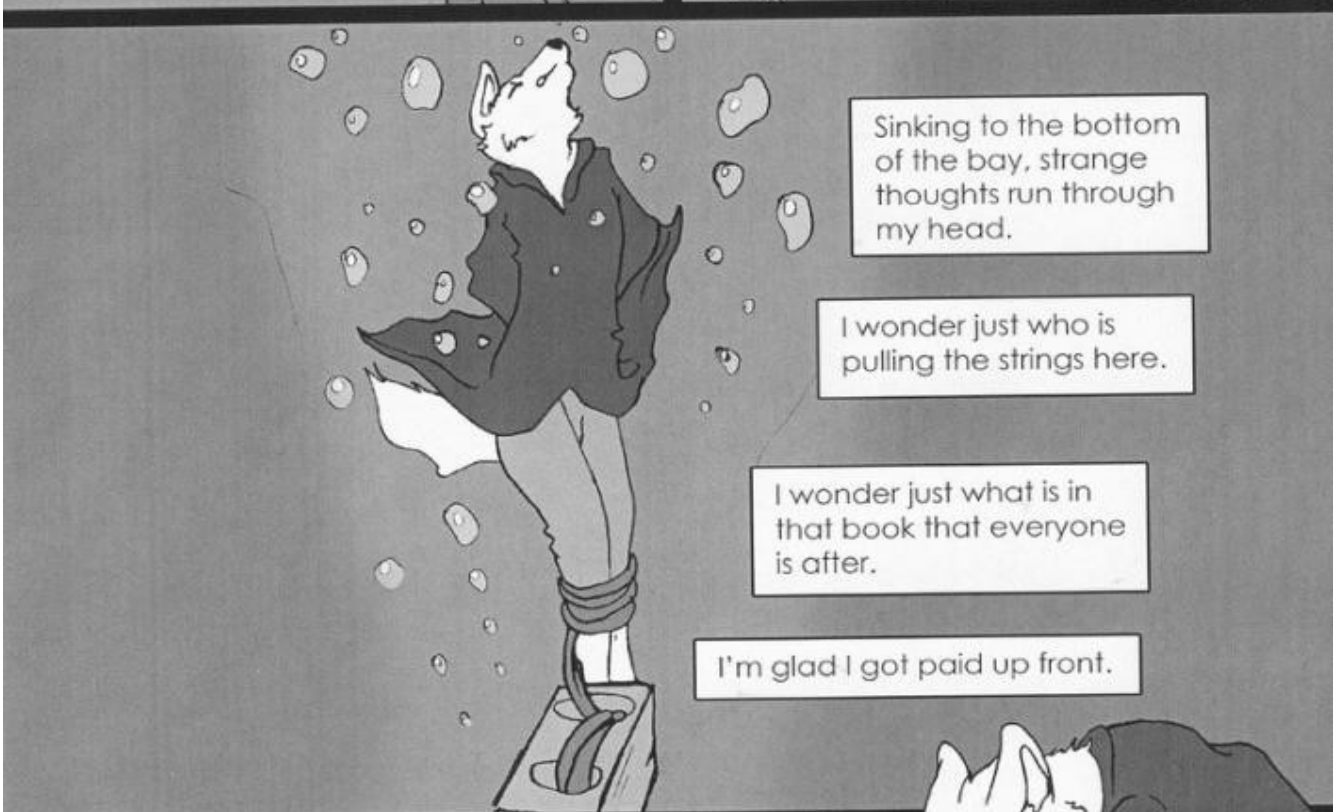
You might want to hold your breath.



I always have to wonder...



...how I constantly wind up in over my head.

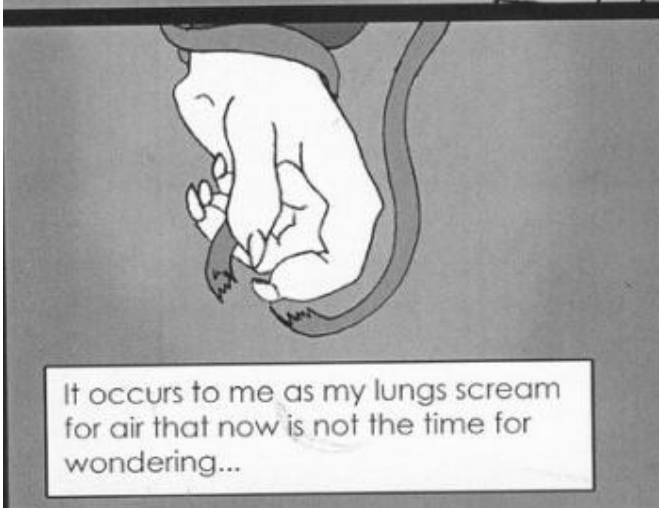


Sinking to the bottom of the bay, strange thoughts run through my head.

I wonder just who is pulling the strings here.

I wonder just what is in that book that everyone is after.

I'm glad I got paid up front.



It occurs to me as my lungs scream for air that now is not the time for wondering...



...it's the time for getting the hell out of here.



As air fills my desperate lungs, I realize it's time to make a decision.



There's a lot more at stake here than just one runaway girl.

Do I play it safe, and walk away from it all?

Or do I make them regret messing with Trent Aramis Knightly?

-and...figure out who "they" are.





A monumental undertaking like this requires a few things.

Regrouping.

And dry clothes.

How'd it go boss?

Did you rescue the Dearhart girl?



I'll be in my office.

No interruptions.

Another job well done. ♡



I need to get to the bottom of this.

Unfortunately, there's only one person who knows anything, who hasn't tried to kill me.

But the only way to get to her, is at the club...



...and I can't show my face around there again.

Time to call in a few favours.



Yeah it's Trent. Listen carefully, I need you to do something for me.

No turning back now.

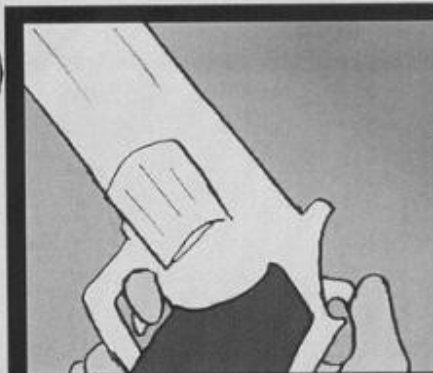
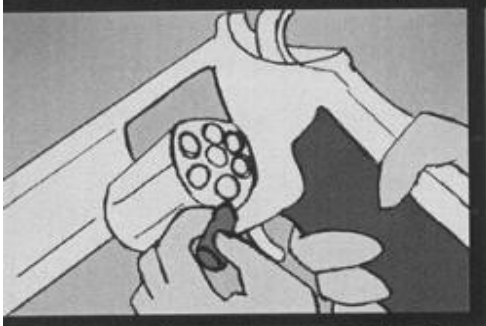


Shoepolish is such a pain to get out of fur.

But right now, sneaking into the club, it works to my advantage...



...especially since everyone else thinks...

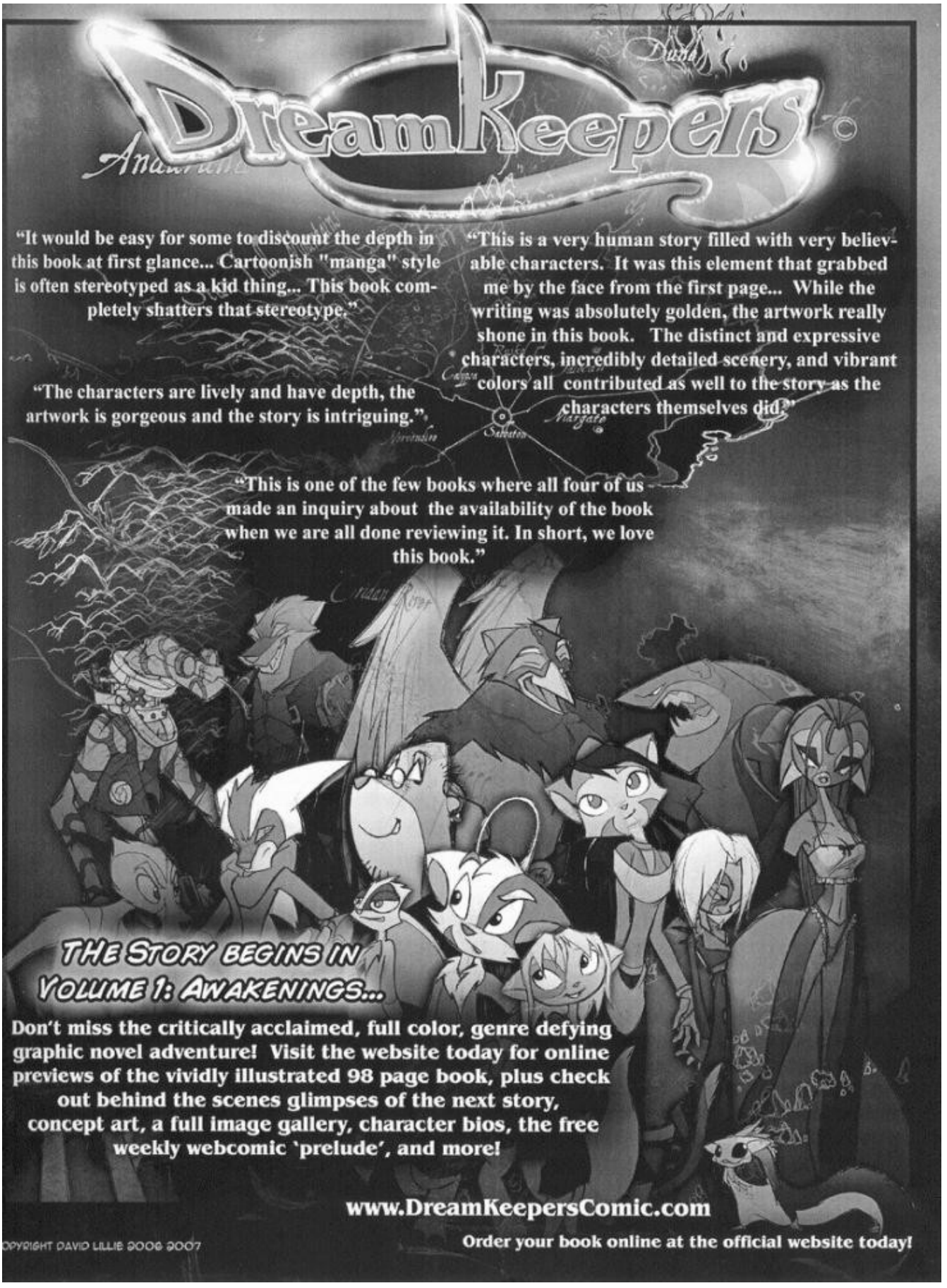


...I'm dead.



TO BE CONTINUED

DreamKeepers



"It would be easy for some to discount the depth in this book at first glance... Cartoonish "manga" style is often stereotyped as a kid thing... This book completely shatters that stereotype."

"The characters are lively and have depth, the artwork is gorgeous and the story is intriguing."

"This is a very human story filled with very believable characters. It was this element that grabbed me by the face from the first page... While the writing was absolutely golden, the artwork really shone in this book. The distinct and expressive characters, incredibly detailed scenery, and vibrant colors all contributed as well to the story as the characters themselves did."

"This is one of the few books where all four of us made an inquiry about the availability of the book when we are all done reviewing it. In short, we love this book."

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A Constellation of Black on Black

Part 1

By Alex Vance

Alex Vance wrote this story for his friend, Kyell Gold, and offers a darker slant on the world Kyell created in his excellent novels 'Volle', 'Pendant of Fortune', and the anthology 'The Prisoner's Release', all available from Sofawolf Press.

Lightning flashed, so the thief finally let go. A second of bright light meant two more of blindness, unless one of the guards had blinked. That would have to be chanced. Felines dislike water under the best of circumstances, and the thief had been hanging by his fingertips under the ledge of a roof in streaming rain for half the night and while the leather jerkin he wore was sturdy and quiet, acclimatized over the years to every curve and swell of the thief's compact and muscular frame and so dark and dull as to be as invisible as his black pelt... Warm, it was not.

The thief landed, not gracefully and not in his usual alert crouch. His unfeeling legs folded farther than he'd have allowed, had he had say in the matter, and all that saved him from grunting when he tumbled face-forward onto his hands was the numbness of them.

He scrambled back quickly, pressing his back against the tower wall, burrowing into the safety of its shade. Rain meant fewer torches, which was to the thief's advantage, but consequently also more alert guards, which decidedly was not. He rubbed his paws together for warmth, as a craftsman readying his tools for use. It had been a brilliant stroke, his leaping for the guard-tower during the changing of the guard at sundown and hiding under its roof to wait until past nightfall, but the wait had taken its toll on his fingers and he'd soon need them in their best shape.

Anxur was the thief's name, and he could count on his tingling, slowly reviving fingers the number of people who knew him so. None now lived who knew his name in its fullness, *Urfa-ni-Anxur*, and the thief rather liked that. If the day came when even the name Anxur was not known among the living, his heart would not ache.

His fingers now did, which was a good sign. The illusory thickness of the leathery pads and the pain throbbing in his claws evinced the imminent return of full sensation, so the thief bent his attention to the next leg of his approach, and the most hazardous. When planning this operation, he'd pondered this part—from the tower to the door—for the better part of a day and decided there was no sure solution, and that he would trust the Anxur who would be there that night to be clever and agile enough to best the challenge.

Now he was that Anxur, and confidence fled him, and he felt no loss. Determination kept him company in its absence, and that was all he'd needed to survive since he'd been a cub. The thief never thought to himself, *you can do this*. All he would ever say to himself was *persevere*.

There was half a heartbeat between the spawning of an opportunity and the passing of it, and the thief had pounced on it without a second thought. A guard

passed a scant dozen feet from him, making his rounds of the courtyard the thief now had to cross, a stag who carried a lantern at the height of his breast.

His body cast massive shadow against the outer wall, a silhouette as of a towering giant, thrice a man's height. It might have been the shadow of Stag himself, and Anxur thought perversely that he might sneak into the city's heathen church tomorrow to burn for Stag some incense, if these gods liked such things.

Lashing his tail around his cloak, making it into a bundle tight against his thigh, the thief walked with long, silent strides to stay in the guard's shade, staring fixedly at the door he was to take, and nearly froze at the sight of something that would sign his failure or his doom unless he found a solution in the space of ten paces.

While the guard seemed to be making a circuit of the wet-cobbled courtyard and would indeed pass by the door on the far corner, whose unlit alcove would harbor the thief long enough for him to best its lock, that path would also lead him past another such alcove which had been beyond his sight before. Under its protection huddled two guards, both canids, who passed between them a bundle. An old soldiers' trick; a coal stolen from a noble's fireplace, kept in a pewter stein and wrapped in cloth could the paws of all who held it for a full night, even on as chilly an autumn night as this.

But while he'd not begrudge a hard-suffering guard the simple comfort of warmed paws, the thief did rather cherish his life. He kicked a stray branch, it hit the wall, the stag swung the lantern around and Anxur engaged all his race's speed to follow the

sweeping slash of black shade around the stag's back and to the copse of leafless trees at the courtyard's center.

The thief had less opportunity to reach his target now, but he'd long held as his guiding principle that the best way to make a flawed plan work was to live first and strategize later. He might be trapped, now, crouching amid the sparse cover of a small colony of tamed trees, surrounded by guards with lanterns and swords and low opinions of his life's worth, but he was alive, and having less than a minute to plan his next move meant he'd probably live at least another minute, something to which Anxur never objected.

He found himself climbing the nearest tree before he could even think about it, and as he climbed it occurred to him that he had not been close enough to a tree to touch it for well over a year. Traveling between the nations of Tephos and Ferrenis—which to him meant traveling between the cities of Divalia and Caril—had been lucrative, but lacked variety and while he'd made sure most of his proclivities were satisfied during his visits, his race's love of climbing branches and bark with naught but claws and grace had gone sorely untended.

The tree was high, as if jealous of the towers in whose company it had been planted, which made for good cover, but poor opportunity. He climbed amid the tall branches, rather than clinging to the trunk, so as better to hide his shape among their hypnotic sway. Anxur had no love of rain or wind, but lightning was a brother to him. Another spark from heaven to earth, another two heartbeats of blindness for all who regarded it, blindness to the sight of a dark feline figure streaking across the void between the branch-tops and the Academy walls, arms outstretched

claws unsheathed, casting all his aim to the task of clinging to the wall if he reached it and leaving none to ready himself for the fall if he didn't.

But Anxur's was the luck of tavern tales and bawdy songs, and nimble fingerclaws found unpainted timber to sink into, strong footclaws brittle mortar. No breath was wasted on relief, nor seconds neither; the thief pulled himself straight upward with all his race's tree-climbing prowess and whispered another prayer to his family's stars for a few seconds more unnoticed by the guards below, for no shade nor shapes now masked his form, exposed and plain to see like spilled black lamp-oil on the wall.

Muscles bunched under supple, damp leather as he pulled himself up to the window above him and poured his supple body into its hollow so gracefully one might think an inspired carpenter had wrought him into the windowsill and while his gaze was fixed below, darting to and fro to absorb all he could about the guards, their numbers and races and movements and weapons, his claws found their way between one hinge's pin and its sheath, pulling one from the other and then lifting one window-leaf fully from its frame.

Anxur spilled into the half-window gap and the room beyond, pulling the window back into place with his claws sunk deep into its wooden frame. He nudged the locking-bolt that protruded from one side into its sibling's cavity and pulled the pane so securely in place that the missing pin on the outside hinge would go unnoticed until the window was cast open for airing, which, given the weather, might not be until next spring.

Someone awoke in the room Anxur found himself but before he could utter

so much as a cry, Anxur had swept across the divide, braced one foot against the foot of the bed planted the other against the headboard and with flat of his paw delivered decisive strikes to throat, chest and chin and unconsciousness overtook a mind that had just been roused from sleep. Whoever it was that had awoken—a rodent of some sort, to judge by the twitching of the thief's whiskers, had a bedmate of the opposite sex and Anxur smiled at the unbidden intuition that this pair would make beautiful babies. He considered saying a hail in their favor, but held his tongue—he was fast running out of prayers, and his mission was not yet over.

Anxur went to the door and opened it without pause. It was well-greased and no creak disturbed the stillness of the hallway beyond. He smelled herbs, here, and it was an old scent, deeply drawn into the smooth-worn masonry of the walls, lit by candles at intervals and interrupted by doors. A servants' wing, this was, for those whose tasks were loftier than mere sweeping and cooking—powder-grinders and ink-brewers, needlsmiths, all peons of a scholarly bent. Anxur was in the right place, at least.

He passed through the hallway like a shadow, noting scents and drawing conclusions, piecing together what the hallway would look like in a few hours. Who would rise first? Who would walk where, dressed how? These buildings had been designed for uses they had been put to effectively for long ages and fathoming what those uses were would teach him how the building worked.

Whiskers twitched and silent footsteps halted as a scent struck him, a single high note amid the din of a clashing olfactory cacophony: sulfur. That foul-reeking substance that served no useful purpose to anyone but an alchemist,

and it was this scent he followed. It led him to a stair, and he abandoned this interesting corridor without regret, soundlessly scaling the stairs two, three steps at a time, the meager effort of it scarcely hastening the feline's breath.

He broke into another hallway when the scent led him there, passing through an archway to leave the staircase and his sensitive footpads stepped on crude, coarse burlap, mats of which were strewn across the floor. The thief smiled, his heart quickening at his own cleverness as he surmised its purpose and hurried to satisfy his racial curiosity. Burlap and scent both led him to a door lit by two covered oil lamps and smoothly the cat slid onto his knees, drawing lock-picks from his belt with the grace of a swordsman drawing his foil. Smaller locks he enjoyed picking with his claws alone but these larger ones required cruder tools and, closing his eyes to more keenly sense the lock's anatomy, the expensive and carefully-wrought picks became extensions of his paws, seeking out tumblers and tempting them into compliance.

Click, click, went the lock, each small sound a triumph until all tumblers had been pressed in place, then turned, and after slipping his tools reverently back in place the thief opened the door to expose a glazery.

Barrels of oil stood stacked in one far corner, with a furnace on the other side whose one small opening still showed a faint red glowing from the embers inside it. Long, oft-burned metal pipes hung on racks above jars filled with glass beads of different qualities. Work-tops stood, widely spaced, sporting unfinished glassware projects of astonishing precision: fine hollow spirals that looked so fragile that a whisker's brush might shatter them, needle-thin

tubes, round bowls and straight jugs with notches in them, all splintering the furnace's faint red light and painting a spectacular landscape of colors on the walls for the feline's keen night vision.

He regarded the baubles with the lust of a life-long thief; any one of these items even in their unfinished state was worth more than all the furnishings in the room through which he'd entered, so finely were they wrought. That explained why a glazery would be built so high in the building; a burglar would have quite a challenge getting these delicate items back to the ground without breaking them.

As that thought struck him, Anxur's attention was snapped away from the shiny marvels surrounding him: a glazery whose works were so fine and so fragile, and that was so well-protected, would not be far from the place where its products would be of most use. The laboratories would be nearby. The burlap mats continued toward the far door where there was hung a rack holding burlap-soled slippers which ensured that none would slip and break a work of fine craftsmanship. Beyond this door the scent of sulfur was strongest.

If the glazery had been a spectacle, the laboratory was pure madness. Oil-lamps hung on the wall even at night and their light was smashed by the arts of masterfully-wrought glass into shades of royalty and great wealth, purple, gold and blue, and the colors of nature and illness, anger and purity alike. Fluids, powders and jellies filled containers, frothy foams coursed through the spiral tubes at which the thief had greedily marveled. Anxur strode through a playground of medicines, a harem of potions and poisons alike, none of which he could identify. Even the sulfur that had led him here was lost in the din of

scents, all alien and unnatural and all very, very strong.

Anxur pulled the front of his cloak up over his snout, letting the waterlogged fabric behind him ensure it would remain taut, giving him some measure of harbor from the odors. He glanced about in wonder, these strange devices bringing out the cat in him, and quickly he quenched those urges: the laboratory itself was not, after all, his goal. He glanced around, seeing only one other door, which he surmised led to the apprentice alchemists' dormitory, among other places, which was the route he'd originally intended to take before getting waylaid by unforeseen circumstances.

He spied a board on the wall which struck him as too similar to the ones around it; some artisan had outdone himself in making that one blend in with its neighbors. It was, of course, a secret cabinet, its lock hidden in the side of the plinth and from here the work became disappointingly straightforward. He picked (with claws, this time) the lock, opened the cabinet and pulled the scrap of vellum from the back pouch on his belt that was his only clue as to his target. Having never learned his letters in the first place, nor feeling much regret over that fact in his adult years, Anxur was not intimidated by the code with which all the scrolls and reams of parchment in the locker were covered. He simply searched for one with markings that matched the one on his little scrap of paper, the one item his employer had given him and as soon as he found his target he rolled the parchment back and forth a few times to uncurl it before carefully folding it over, inks on the inside, and tucked it into the pouch at his belt, buckling that securely. The scrap of parchment he immediately took into his mouth and chewed on, for while being discovered

in possession of a valuable state secret was grounds for prosecution, being found with evidence of his employer's identity was downright unprofessional.

He closed the locker with a sigh more of regret than relief and spent a moment simply leaning against it. It was *done*, the excitement was over, the danger, and the cleverness that brought out in him. Now there was simply the running, which his kind were built for and not a single one of his instincts had any doubts as to his ability to make a safe exit, given that no alarms yet sounded. His ears folded and his tail drooped at the prospect of a dull egress, and with a sigh, he jogged to the far door to make good with his quarry.

The handoff went without a hitch. His Tephossian contact in Caril was punctual, as those anonymous and frequently-replaced figures always were. This one was a ferret, and he visited the tavern they'd agreed to return to after his mission just as the barman called time. In the groggy shuffling of drunk and unsatisfied patrons, the exchange of a folded piece of vellum for a cloth-wrapped gem was easy to miss. A few days' wait followed, spending the last of his Ferrennian coin on lodgings and food in different inns, surrounded by different people, making no conversation with any of them. Half-heartedly Anxur kept telling himself how much he was looking forward to fencing his gem, a splendid green stone, cut to highlight the red impurity at its core. With that money he could...

The day came soon enough and he donned a neat but terribly old-fashioned set of robes, a hood, and affected both a limp and a squint when he went into a back-market jeweler's shop and acted the part of a doddering old fool who'd dropped an heirloom and fancied he

might keep himself in cups and comfort for his few remaining years by selling what broke off. Anxur got a far lower price from the jeweler than he might have had from a proper fence, but the prospect of dealing with such a self-important little snot so bored him that he couldn't bear it.

Even this money was hard to spend. With his purse fat and jingling he'd adopted airs of enthusiasm, forcing a smile so as to hopefully fan the fire of his own spirits, and pondered, as night fell, what luxuries he'd reward himself with after enduring hardships and risking death once again. He decked himself in finer clothes, to begin with. A bag tailored to easily stow his cloak and jerkin in came first—almost as fine as the one he'd lost in a mission at sea not a year earlier—and after that was taken care of, he strode boldly into a tailor's shop and spent an hour perusing the fabrics before settling on black velvet, a style he'd favored once in Divalia, some back-and-forths ago.

His suit was ready within a day, and showed the price he'd paid for it. It was of a very unusual cut, straight and angular, the tunic beltless and double-breasted like an admiral's uniform. It was a fad, that style, the pinnacle of Carilian avant-garde, but sure to lose its luster within months. Anxur had no illusions that the clothes that now wrapped his discretely muscular form would be ruined rags well before their cut went out of fashion.

Some rings, some earrings, nothing too exorbitant—these were always handy to have, as they could retain their value over time and across borders. Anxur looked a fine gentleman in all but the satchel he carried under his rakish cape—a true noble wouldn't be caught dead carrying possessions from place to place. Folk took him for a merchant on

the up-slope of his fortunes, and that image suited him well enough.

But the pleasure he took in his fineries was a dull one. He slept in more comfortable beds—some occupied by warm, sweet-smelling bodies he'd paid a good price for—but neither the comfortable mattresses nor the comforting ladies he procured truly brought a thrill. Some delight, surely, as there isn't a cat without at least a smidgeon of a hedonist in him, but all his experiences were ones he could take or leave.

It always went this way, after the mission, and turning his hindsight forward, Anxur knew he'd tarry in Caril until his purse became too light, then reach out to his Ferrennian contacts to see if the good nobles of Caril, perhaps, had some business an independent contractor like Anxur could facilitate in Divalia. Then some travel, a fresh burst of adventure, and this emptiness again. This dreadful, reasonless emptiness. But meanwhile, there were the taverns, the company, and the drink. That would do for now.

Ale brought out the bard in men, songs rang till deep in the night and in all that good company, gazing at all those drunk, ecstatic, friendly and grateful faces, Anxur felt ever more ill. He slunk through the stinking, crude bodies and found that too many of them blocked the route to the main exit for him to bear. He turned, surprising himself with the care he took in avoiding stains to his fine new clothes, dodging sloshed ale. They were sickening to him, these dregs of a society he already found nauseating and a powerful shuddering overtook him as he sped out the door and into the alley beyond.

He'd have liked it to be dirtier, but the

autumn rains had passed and the cobbles were cold but dry. A sliver of light streamed in from a street-side, yellow and flickering from a street-lamp. The thief wanted to leave, then and there, turn his back on the city and never return. But Urfa-ni-Anxur knew full well there was nowhere in the world where he would feel otherwise.

Frustration boiled in his veins like the dazzling concoctions he'd seen in the laboratory and the whining headache that had been overshadowed by the tavern's noise now grew to unparagoned intensity. An ache set in his jaw, itching behind his eyes and under his teeth and his stomach tightened as if to expel the foul, foreign nourishment he'd eaten.

"A twelfth for a ride," said a light but wholly unsavory voice from the shady depths of the alley and instantly the thief's body restored itself to full readiness. Anxur straightened and partway lidded his eyes like the gentleman he made pretense to be, and turned, leisurely, to the speaker, who now continued. "Half that if you fancy my muzzle. Didn't eat much tonight, and I could use the practice."

From the darkest shadows stepped a slender figure. Canine, judging by the silhouette of the muzzle. Lupine, by the gait. None of this was surprising. Outside the fine brothels there were plenty of young lads and ladies that plied the oldest trade in tavern alleys, catch as catch can. Dangerous, to be sure; any client might be a cut-throat-or worse, a pimp with designs on long-term exploitation. The surprise was the young male's attire, in particular its shocking similarity to Anxur's.

Where the thief had fitted his jacket properly, the shirt tucked into his pants, this young scamp had seemingly gone

to lengths to lead his fine clothes to ruin by the swiftest route. The jacket was worn open, scuffed and muddied in places and revealed a tattered shirt that left his grey-furred belly exposed. The pants were worn low and lacked both belt and top button, no doubt to accentuate the lad's more profitable features and give hints as to their easy availability.

The boy was patient—not quite a boy, but no man either. He waited while Anxur approached, showing something far closer to acceptance than fearlessness. The thief had a quick suspicion, and leaned forward to sniff beneath the boy's ear to confirm it.

"You're a charmer, mister, but I ain't offering a dance. Just a ride."

"You shouldn't be out here," said Anxur, walking around the lad, whose back straightened, tail lashing slightly.

"Why's that, mister?"

Anxur was entirely unsure why, but he felt compelled to touch the young wolf. A paw laid on his shoulder was enough to satisfy this urge of his, but it seemed to electrify the boy. "Your father will be most displeased. Or is that the point?"

A shocked look, deep brown eyes showing whites as the wolf's head whipped around over his shoulder, ears pinned as he regarded the thief, who for his part was trying to fathom what he was feeling. Superiority? Cruelty? He wondered what his intentions were with this youth... did he mean to scare him? Kill him?

"So you've lasted a week in the city on your own and you fancy yourself quite the rogue," Anxur continued. The lad was riveted, panting with fear and excitement. "You may last another, but

no more. Men—even boys—survive these places when they have something to live for, at least a little while, but you don't have that. Winter is fast approaching. Death will find you well before then. A knife, for the sake of the coins you ask. An unthinking claw in the heat of the passion you sell," the thief said, extending his claws to prick through the velvet covering the boy's shoulder and the young wolf gasped at the sharpness of them. "Hunger or cold. Perhaps a sickness. You have limitless options in your quest for a death away from home."

The wolf spun, then, with the speed of the light-bodied and Anxur raised one hand to easily block the strike he expected, but none came. The wolf clasped the thief's wrist, and his shoulder, and stood on the tips of his toes to crush himself against the feline and bring their lips together—for an instant alone, for Anxur pushed him away with force that sent him flying, knocking back against the tavern door and then onto his knees.

"There are deadlier things than kisses, boy," the cat said with fury at the boy's insolence, and strode toward him, claws unsheathed, having no clear mind as to his intentions but feeling no inkling of restraint, whatever they were.

And then the boy, kneeling in the dirt, looked up with those deep brown eyes, still rimmed with white. "Name one, and I'll die a sage," he said, his voice bereft of the guile and false accents he'd affected, refined and soft and tender like a well-bred noble before he's broken in as a leader of men. "Tell me a secret you'd kill me for, and I'll love you as long as I live."

Anxur became aware of his heart in the most direct way. It was not the drink that addled his brain, nor lust for the

lad. Shapely as he was, Anxur's tastes lay with females, but the person that the boy was mattered to him no more than the person he was mattered to the boy, each simply saw something in the other they very much needed, and all else could fall to rot and ruin as long as they could taste each other. "I am a thief and a spy, and I hire my services out to men like your father and their Tephossian counterparts alike."

"My name's Kenton of Westermarch, son of Duke Avery," breathed the young wolf, clinging to the feline like a suppliant to his cantor, pleading for forgiveness. "I think I might be yours forever."

It was something more raw even than lust that drove their ravenous passion for each other. Kenton had enough experience with the mechanics of the love between men that any barriers to their bodily hunger vanished in the light of his skill. The spilled back into the tavern in a tangle of limbs and bruising and kisses and a cheer rippled through the drink-addled crowd at seeing their benefactor so taken with a new lover. Ignoring the cheers the followed them up the stairs, the pair threw clothes aside, tore buttons from each other, knocked over vases and scratched varnished handrails before Anxur broke the kiss for a breath and a kick to one of the doors, throwing his young wolf into the room and slamming the unlocked door behind him.

That it swung back open didn't matter to them. That the room happened to be unoccupied didn't strike them as fortunate; it had a bed and that's all they cared for. Velvet tore, buttons ripped and naked bodies pressed together as if yearning to merge. Claws scratched to the point of tearing, fangs clacked and pinched and drew blood

from neck and tongue and wrist and all was a dazzling spiral into oblivion and the sublime at once.

Anxur awoke to a naked body, warm sun and a cool draft running between the open window and the open door. The room was a wreck; the basin and water-jug were smashed, along with a mirror, porcelain and glass shards littering the floor. Ripped sheets, stained with sweat and streaked with blood lay strewn about and the bed was a ruin of carpentry. One leg had fully collapsed and a sharp spring jutted out of the mattress just beside his neck that would have cost him all the blood in his body if he'd rolled over it.

The fates, it seemed, had smiled on him. And speaking of smiling, he felt a curl tugging at the corners of his lips, and saw it matched in the face of the young wolf he cradled in his arms, one eye dark and one lip split, but smiling regardless with the guilelessness of sleeping youths.

What this was, Anxur couldn't tell. Having never felt the slightest stirring when regarding even the finest of the males offered at the brothels he visited he'd been all but certain he lacked a taste for his own sex, yet here he was, embracing a lad as naked and as male as he was, by the feel of that early morning firmness against his thigh. And judging by the pleasant glow of his own sheath, he'd sated whatever lusts the lad had fanned in him in the boy's body quite adequately, and at length. The thief was puzzled to no small degree. And, clothes or no, he was long gone by the time young Kenton of Westermarch woke to a cool bed, an open window, and a purse of coins on the bed's other pillow.

"Young master, this really won't do,"

said the old ram as he helped Kenton lace up a fresh shirt while being jostled on the carriage's hard wooden seats, leaving him to tend to the lacing while he smoothed the linnen pants' legs down. "Your father has been worried sick, and all these days you were in the taverns, drinking and gambling?"

The young wolf's fingers wouldn't find the laces, nor tug them in the right directions. His vision was blurry and his hearing, while dulled, rendered sounds far too loudly for his battered brain to endure. The ride was agony to his aching body, and being denied the option of snoozing through it gave him no deep sense of friendship toward his aging valet. "I may have drunk a little, but it wasn't gambling that I made my money with."

The ram's head whipped up so swiftly that, had his horns been straight instead of curled, Kenton's throat would have been pinned to the carriage's backrest. "It's gambling you'll be telling your father about, if you have half a brain, young master. This, this... *dallying* with common folk don't befit one of your station, nor any other Church-blessed cub neither!" the ram barked, his village-bred accent breaking through the refinement he'd taught himself as he ascended to servanthood of ever greater stature, as it usually did when he was suitably outraged.

"Don't worry, Farthing," Kenton said with a sigh, leaning back while the goat grumblingly tugged the strings at his collar to straighten his shirt. "I've had my fun, I've tasted the wine I thirsted for and while I haven't had my fill, the memory of it will last me a while. I'll bear my father's fury and play the part of the hedonist until his rage is tempered and he calls me to his study to share with me a snort of brandy and ask me of the girls I've bedded in my

'ramblings'. There'll be peace in the house by next Feliday."

Loath though the ram was to admit it, this was a gesture for the old servant's benefit, and he knew that full well. Young Kenton was a trouble-maker, had been since he'd been so small as to fit in the ram's palm without effort, but whenever he sought to soothe his father's feathers after ruffling them with a vengeance, it was less to ensure peace for himself, and more to ensure it with the long-suffering ram. It was no secret that Farthing craved nothing more than a regular household to tend to, and whenever the rakish young wolf restrained his contrary nature, it was affection and generosity for the ram who'd cared for him for years.

This latest excess broke all previous records, of course. Not merely did he attend a gambling house in the city without a body-guard, not merely did he lure a stable-hand into his bed; he'd left the house entirely, dressed in his finest clothes, with in his pockets the ale flask that was the first of many family heirlooms his father would bestow on him in time and as much precious, pungent sea-salt as his pockets could carry. Both he sold for far too little, but these material matters were not what would invoke his father's ire.

Defiance was the key, and as the carriage bore him ever deeper into the Nobles' Quarter, toward the Academy and the finest mansion beyond its gates, it was that which troubled the young wolf most. He had not only intentionally defied his father more cruelly than he had ever before done, but in so doing he'd crossed paths with a man who seemed to embody danger itself, and while the desperation and fatalism of that night had faded when he'd awoken, gratefully, to find the

room abandoned, the memory remained burned into his mind. The words that had come, unbidden, from his lips. The things he had done with those same lips to please a man who could at any point in their passions have squeezed too hard, scratched too deep, and killed him...

Perhaps he had not said those things. Perhaps the drink and lack of sleep had made dreams and memories mingle, like paint on an artist's palette, and the black-furred stranger he'd bedded had been no different from the sailors and gamblers whom he'd helped satisfy to further his own degradation, all for the spite of his heritage. Perhaps he had not been that god of hazard he remembered, bunched muscles under silk black fur, an explosion of need and energy like the fireworks on Blossoms Eve.

The sun, streaming into the carriage when the driver opened it for him, did to his musings what it does to all night-time reverie and the memory dried and crumbled when Kenton saw, with his own eyes and by the sun's shrill light, his family mansion amid the Academy grounds, and striding from the doors the enraged, robed wolf whose steaming breaths were as those of a dragon.

As predicted, Duke Avery's fury passed like a stormcloud over a less imposing cloud, for while the old Duke's ire had waned and left his everyday disposition, this could by no means be called 'sunny'. Kenton once again was free to leave the house and partake of his usual pleasures-avoiding study, enviously watching young men scarcely older than he practice exciting skills like fencing and climbing, even sneaking into one of the Academy's study halls to listen to a long-winded discourse on

Ferrenian architecture. The look of rapt attention on the faces of most of the audience filled young Kenton with jealousy, for nothing he'd found in his short but eventful life had fascinated him even a fraction as profoundly as some of these students appeared to be in this lecture.

He sneaked back out, insofar as a young noble boldly wandering where his father's name entitles him to can be called sneaking. The bells would soon ring for worship and the students would march to the Academy chapel. The upperclassmen had no doubt already been given leave to pass through the gates and into the city, to attend the services in the church at the very border of the Nobles' and Merchants' quarters—as Duke Avery no doubt had done.

"No worship for you, *jaxif-ha*?" said a voice that sent a shiver up Kenton's spine as he walked the path from the Academy proper to the outlying buildings. While seeming to emanate from all directions at once, none of the other passers-by seemed to have noticed, lending Kenton a tingling fancy of magic his rational mind knew to be a folly.

He drew his fur-collared coat closer around himself as if warmth would dispel the chill of the voice he'd heard and slunk into the shade of a tree, as if secrecy would still his beating heart. "What does that mean?"

"Literally, *little wolf*. It's a pun, however. *Hajaxifa* is the word, in my language, for 'heretic'. Have you missed me?"

Kenton could swear the voice was inside his head, so intimate was its intonation, so addictive its timbre. "Since you abandoned me? Perhaps."

"You're one to speak of abandon, *puhai an axfa*."

Kenton snorted, feeling a swell of excitement at taunting this bodiless voice, and at once a deep regret at his disrespect, a sensation he'd only ever felt when he'd done something to make Farthing's life a misery—and even then, that was a pale shadow of the shame he felt when he said, "Another of your clever puns?"

A pause. "An insult, if you must know. Your mother's a whore."

The young wolf stifled a snarl, desiring to draw no undue attention to him as he lingered under a tree, whispering to it, caressing its bark as if the dry, cracked wood were that firm, black-silk-furred expanse of chest he'd had for a pillow when he had, that star-crossed night, enjoyed the finest sleep since he'd first opened his eyes to the world. "My mother," Kenton said through gritted teeth and slowly, as he tried to fathom what exactly his emotion was, "is dead."

"As is mine. And my father. And my sisters. All my family, in fact, and all the families I'd known as a child, all dead. Do you want to trade pities?"

"No," said Kenton, ears folded, pressing his forehead against the tree, his palms as well, ears folded and tail drooped as if in supplication to Wolf. "No, please. I want you."

The pause was agonizing. Kenton felt an itching in his gums and a turning in his stomach, his paws were clammy and his heart would not slow its gallop to a march. He looked up into the tree's brown-leaved canopy. "Are you there? Did you hear me?"

Had Kenton had claws enough, he'd have scaled the tree in a blink, so affrighted was he by the paw laid on his shoulder—a paw which was equipped with claws for climbing. “I heard full well. I’ve missed you also, *jaxif-ha*, though it took me some time to plumb the depths of my feelings.”

“I wouldn’t mind feeling you plumb my—”

“Don’t be vulgar,” said Anxur, letting Kenton step away to turn and gaze upon the figure he now cut; he’d spent the remainder of his coinage on fresh clothes, to replace the ones he’d ripped off himself during that raw, pure night, and he looked more a merchant than a gentleman now. A dark brown leather tunic and pants to match and a feathered cap perched atop his head that made the cat look wholly foppish, a far cry from the deadly creature he’d been in the dark.

But Kenton wasn’t fooled. In those slitted eyes there smoldered—dimmed, but not snuffed—the hunger he’d seen in them that night. That night, that night, that night...

“We’ll be late for worship,” said the cat, and strode in the direction from which Kenton had come.

Seeing Anxur—Kenton had been surprized at how forthcoming the black cat was with his name, after only minimal prodding—sit among the congregation, mostly students and housekeepers and teachers and the like, was comical, horrifying and pitiful at once. Anxur was a foreign spy, after all, sitting in the midst of this nation’s spies-in-training, which was both an enormous joke to Kenton and a source of anxiety. Was he a pawn in some larger game? Had he been lured here

for a reason?

These were the thoughts that occupied Kenton’s mind as he utterly ignored the cantor, even failing to join the congregation in song, while Anxur did a passable job of murmuring along without knowing the words. In his heart, he knew these worries to be follies, but they captivated him. Was Anxur here on an errand for Ferrenis? Had he infiltrated the Academy and Kenton’s affections as the spearhead of an invasion? Or, perhaps, a more modest goal. Assassination? Was he setting young Kenton up to take the blame?

As drink to a drunkard, these thoughts occupied Kenton’s mind such that Anxur’s brow furrowed as he nudged the lad’s elbow. “The loud-mouthed *hajaxifa* in the robe has ceased singing. We’re free to leave, I believe. What has you so preoccupied? I thought you’d be pleased to see me.”

“I am, I am,” said Kenton hastily, slipping out of his seat, staying close to Anxur as they joined the congregation in shuffling out the chapel doors. “I feel like a cub at Blossoms Eve, tossing and turning in bed, the fireworks still ringing in my ears and flashing before my eyes... trying to sleep and at once hoping to stay awake, perhaps to catch Wolf himself trotting through the walls of my room, a present between his jaws, for me to open in the morning with the other cubs...”

“As do I,” said Anxur, his tone now more one of equality than mystery, and a note rang through his voice that showed the worry that gnawed on him. “I’ve felt most... peculiar since our meeting. The food tastes better and life is finer than it was before, but not so fine as *during*. Do you know what I mean?”

They passed, slowly, through the hallways of the Academy's public building, where assemblies, public addresses and sometimes student performances were held to demonstrate to the lords and ladies whose coin indirectly funded the establishment that fine works were done within its walls. Being a public building, of course, it was a place of pomp and posture, with glass display-cases lining the walls, showing awards, icons, trifles and weapons. None had so much as a plaque or a nameplate, inviting the interested gentry to catch a passing student and inquire about a piece's history—and, to impress the nobles on such occasions, the Academy's students were drilled at length regarding the display-pieces' histories.

"More or less... When we met, I plunged myself into the deepest well I've known, far as I could get from that which I was born to... but it doesn't seem so terrible to me, now. I feel no great urge to escape it—at least, not so great as before." Kenton snorted, smiling to himself. "You could say that life, to me, seems finer than it did before. Though, as you say, not as fine as... Anxur?"

Anxur was gone, Kenton noted, and while he expected to find, when he turned, naught but thin air and a fresh mystery to arouse his flagging passions, he saw the feline's back, black-furred paw pressed against the glass of a display-case. "What is it?" Kenton asked, touching his arm.

The cat looked up, past Kenton's fine-featured head and, curious, the lad turned to see what he was looking at. There was nothing, naturally, and just as naturally there was nothing when Kenton looked back. The vanishing trick he'd expected a moment earlier had now taken place, though it gave him no thrill now.

He stepped closer to the case, placing his paw where Anxur's had been as if there were some intimacy to that gesture. He regarded the object in the case—a simple statue, about a forearm high, carved from some matte black stone, though at intervals and in little groups, small nuggets of shinier stone had been artfully inserted, so flush with the surface their presence would go unnoticed upon cursory inspection.

"That's an interesting piece," said a fox, stepping up from behind, with a jaunty set to his ear and a swish to his tail that was a little more than friendly. "It's from the southern kingdoms; a gift from an envoy some ten years ago. Supposedly he said that by giving the King's man this statue, the unprovoked raids at the west of our adjoining border would cease. This gesture, and this information, is part of the Academy curriculum, you know, a regular subject of debate in the political classes. Did the envoy mean it as an apology? Was it some sort of religious token? Are you free for lunch?"

No doubt the rakish fox had meant for Kenton to realize that last suggestion only after a second's thought, but the wolf's senses and intellect were still on edge from being near Anxur and he saw through the fox's game so quickly that all the fun was stripped from it. Without a word, he turned away, leaving the fox no doubt to shrug. Some other day, Kenton might have enjoyed the diversion as a pleasant change from the usual rough males he consorted with. Some other day he might, perhaps, have been wooed by the fox's smooth manner, but not today.

A bitterness had crept into his heart, Kenton noticed as he walked that lonely path back to what was nominally his

home. He didn't pause at the tree from which Anxur had miraculously spoken, certain the feline wouldn't be there. Coming home, he handed Farthing his coat and plodded up the stairs, pushing thoughtlessly into his room and throwing himself onto his bed—noticing only after he'd rolled around to dry his inexplicable tears on his pillow, that Anxur was already between the sheets, wearing not a stitch.

There was no explanation given for Anxur's sudden disappearance earlier, nor was one asked. Kenton was fast outgrowing his childish desire for answers, gaining a more mature acceptance of the unknown and unknowable. Fresh lusts were awakened at the mere touch of that strong, compact body, every muscle a wound coil ready to spring at a moment's notice, and those claws! Such was the delight of their tantalizing threat, as the cat raked them over Kenton's limbs and neck and nethers that the moon was pitched high before Kenton realized he hadn't yet disrobed. He was panting and tingling from ears to toes and no union had yet transpired.

Or rather, no union to which the lad was accustomed. It now seemed to him that using so sublime a word to describe such unfeeling, unsharing rutting was a crime. That was consorting or dallying as the polite euphemisms went, union was this... this togetherness, this harmony. Anxur was generous as a lover, or rather, he was commanding, thrusting sensations and pleasures on young Kenton to no benefit of his own, merely to sate his desire for the young wolf to feel these things. Kenton had not the maturity to act in kind, though he had generosity of his own to offer.

Shortly after realizing he was still clothed (and, hard as he was, unexposed) he resolved that issue. This

was lucid loving, Kenton realized, fully aware his mind was addled by neither drink nor the deathly lust that had gripped him *that night*. He would remember everything of *this* night... the touching and feeling of two lovers familiarizing themselves with one another's body, the teasing procession of modesties teased, explored and then pounced upon.

There was the rutting, naturally, and Kenton had his place therein. He held no truck with trading roles, nor did Anxur. It was Kenton who awoke with a familiar and pleasant ache under his tail, Kenton who tasted salt on his lips, Kenton whose wrists were tender from fierce gripping. And Kenton who was surprised to find, when he awoke, not only that dawn had not yet broken, but that his company had not yet departed.

"Is Anxur really your name?" Kenton asked, daring to roll closer to his bedfellow and found, to his delight, warm arms enveloping him, pulling him close to that powerful heartbeat. He felt silly and small and giddy at the realization he cared not a jot about either.

The cat rolled onto his back, pulling the wolf atop him and pointed, upside-down, through the sliver of night-time sky between the folds of Kenton's hastily-drawn curtains. "Do you see the stars above the moon? To the left, somewhat like a crown? Those are my family's stars. We pray to them as you pray to Wolf—if you prayed, that is. And our prayers are purer."

Kenton giggled, the hard body under him so intoxicating it made his head spin. "It's a contest, now? Whose faith is the deeper?"

Anxur shook his head. "No contest," he said, yawning expansively, then settling

his long whiskers back in place, "but truth regardless. Your gods... or spirits, or ancestors or whatever you primitives call it. They teach you tolerance, and kindness and while these are all fine words, they're hardly divine lessons. They don't teach you repentance, nor sacrifice."

Kenton leaned down on the broad expanse of Anxur's black-furred chest, synchronizing his breath with the cat's, finding himself ever more taken with Anxur's mere presence and sensing the danger of that attachment. "That's not true, Anxur. There's the song of Wolf giving up his first share to the Pack's Omega when he was ill, and—"

There was genuine anger in Anxur's snarl. "You speak of your Wolf as if he were your neighbor. You have no fear of him! You have no awe, nor do you tremble in his shadow. What value has such a god? What can you learn from him, if he is not above you? Our... my gods are fearsome creatures in whose august company I am not worthy to stalk and when I die, I will stand before their judgment."

The young wolf felt his arousal stir at this impassioned speech, unable to explain it and unwilling to ponder. He ground his slender body against the strong form of the man beneath him, rubbing lips to lips as he asked, "And do you fear that?"

"I am terrified," said Anxur, and spun so fast that Kenton scarcely had time to feel dizzy before he found himself pinned on his back and mounted once more, looking up into Anxur's family stars.

To be concluded in FurNation #10!



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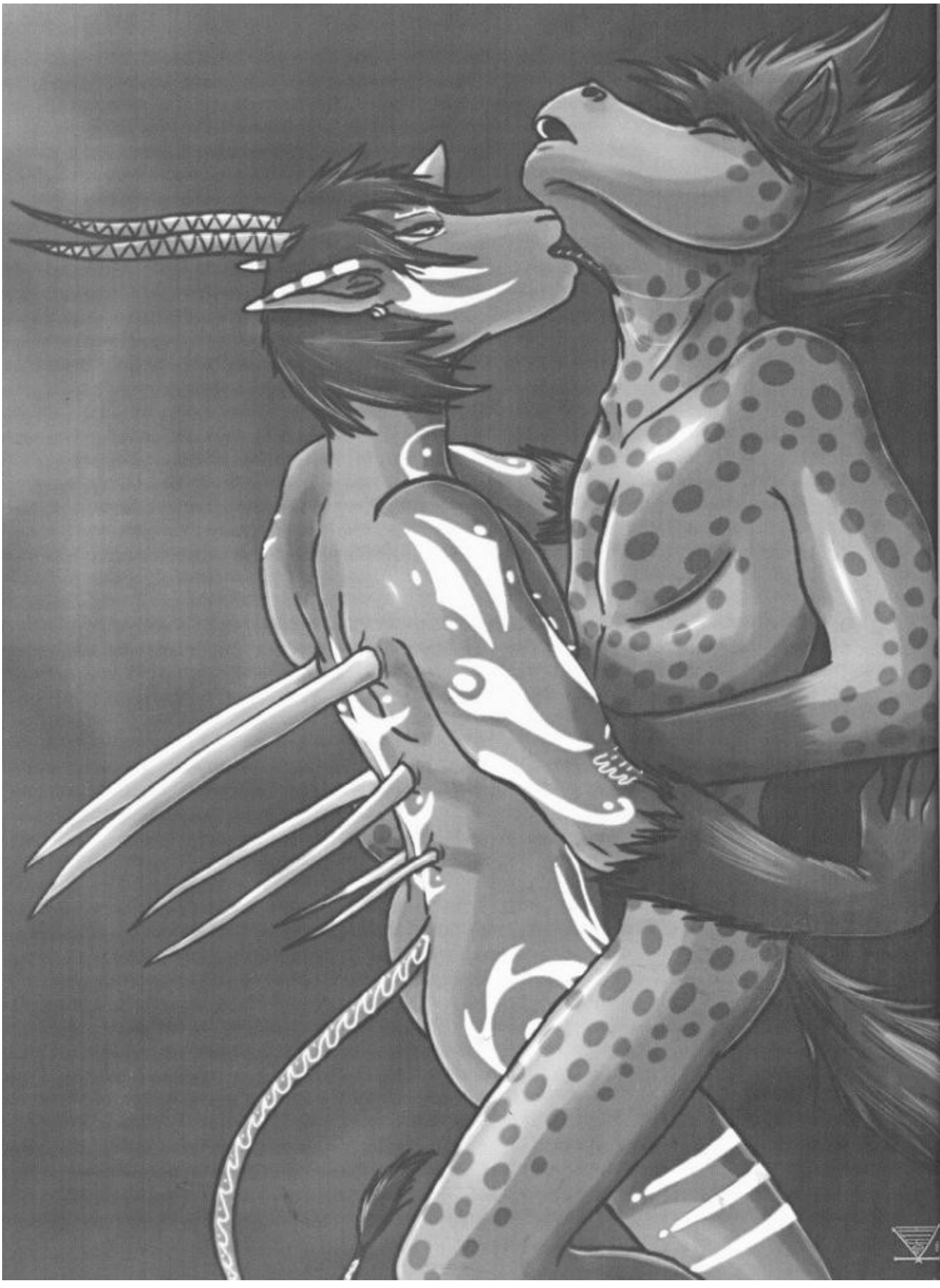


My areas of focus are the exotic and the erotic. Rarely will you see me draw foxes, wolves, cats, or mice. I tend to focus on African and Asian species, which I believe to be the most unique and beautiful creatures on Earth.

I also have a fascination for mythological creatures, hence why I created the Kadaths – a race of lustful daemons, one of which also serves as my persona and namesake.

I try to convey personality through my characters regardless of what they are doing. Diamond the zebra is sly and sexy, while Puzzle the giraffe is sweet and ditzzy. I hope my creations bring as much joy to you as I have had creating them!

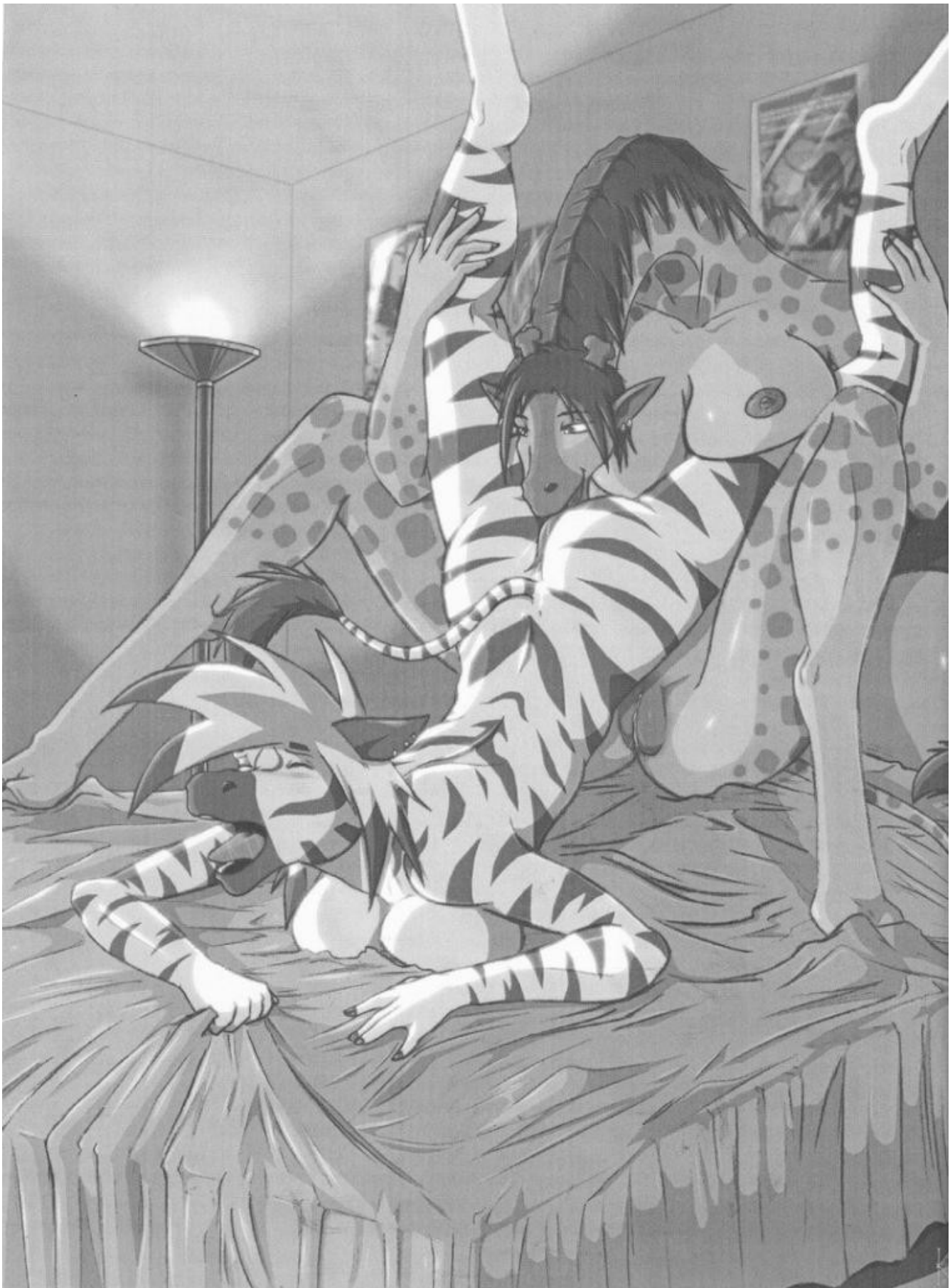
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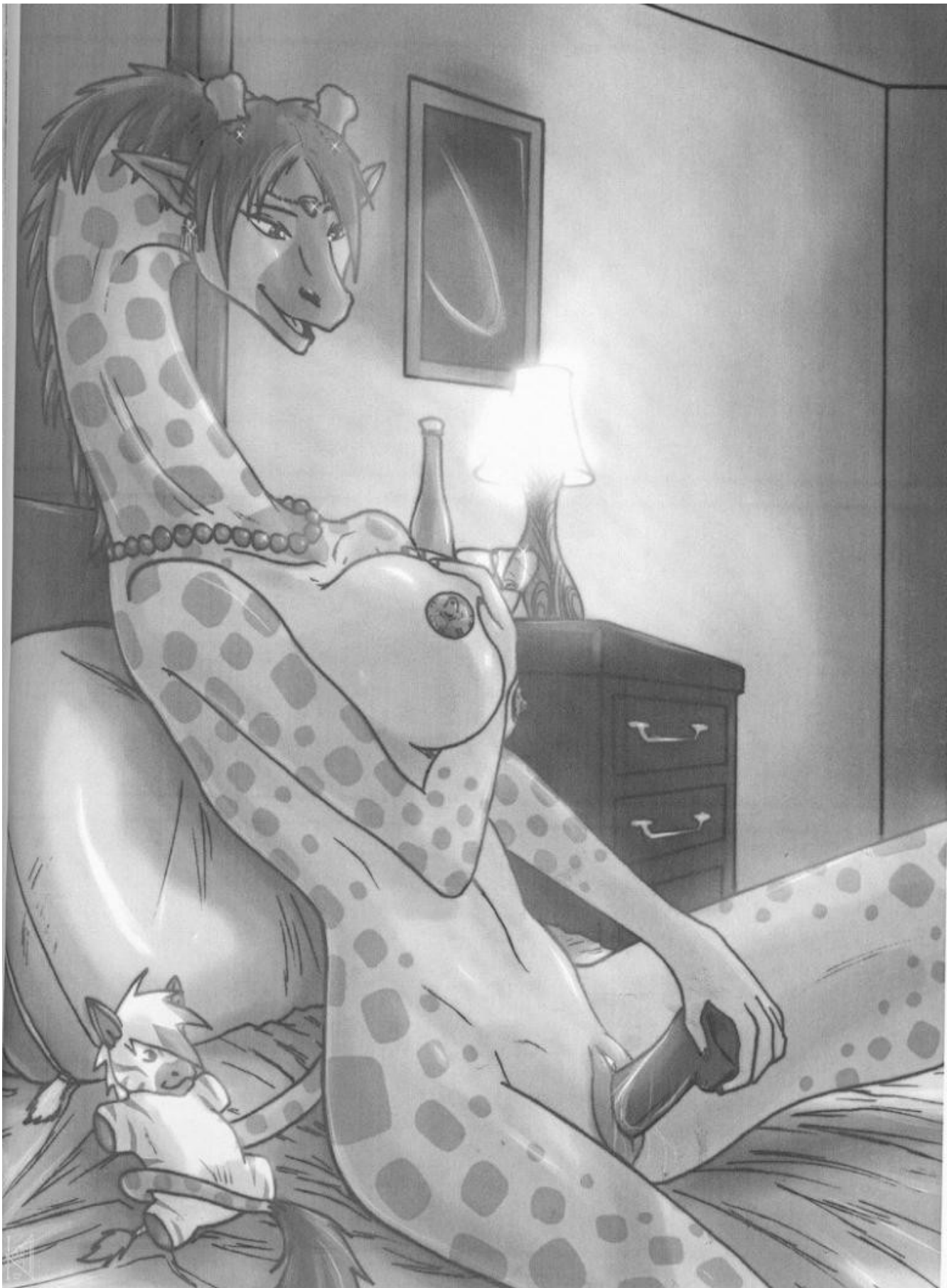
















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